**The Media and Parliament**

**Brian McNair**

For decades, indeed centuries, the Scottish media have been a source of national pride. Alongside the education system, the Church of Scotland and the legal apparatus the media have been rightly viewed as a distinctive Scottish cultural institution, a key part of what makes Scotland a nation rather than a region.[1] Scotland has long sustained, per capita, one of the richest and most diverse media systems in the world, encapsulating a heady mix of local newspapers such as the West Highland Free Press, national [i.e., Scotland-wide] newspapers and broadcast outlets such as BBC Scotland and the Scotsman, and UK-based media with Scottish editions such as the Sun and the Mail. These media have reflected and fuelled what is in turn a distinctive Scottish political identity separate from, though connected with that of the United Kingdom as a whole. There has, for example, been no major paper with a pro-Tory editorial line north of the border for longer than most of us can remember, reflecting (and perhaps contributing to) the Conservative Party's poor showing in successive Scottish elections.

**The Scottish media: a watchdog without teeth**

The roots of this distinctive media environment lie in Scotland's history as a nation conscious and protective of its own culture. Arthur Herman's book on the Scottish Enlightenment[2] shows how important Scottish intellectual life - and by extension the media which allowed it to flourish - were to the development of democratic and liberal thought not only in Britain and Europe, but the United States of America and beyond. The coffee house culture of free thinking and discussion identified by Jurgen Habermas as a crucible of bourgeois democracy[3] was prominent in late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century Edinburgh, and articulated in periodicals such as the Edinburgh Review. Scotland gave birth to some of the oldest newspapers still publishing anywhere in the world, such as the Aberdeen Press and Journal (1748) and the Herald (launched in 1783 as the Glasgow Advertiser).

Until devolution, however, and with growing urgency in the eighteen years of UK Tory government preceding it, there was a sense of something amiss in the national story covered by the Scottish media. Scotland was a nation, yes, but not a nation state. Its government was in the hands of the Westminster parliament, its political direction at the mercy of whichever party ruled there. Margaret Thatcher's introduction of the poll tax in Scotland, one year before it became law in England, became a symbol of the vulnerability of Scottish society and politics to the whims of an ideologically hostile Westminster majority. The Scottish media, unlike their London-based counterparts, lacked a national constituent assembly within which these and other UK government-imposed measures could be scrutinised and challenged. As professionals

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[1] For a recent collection of essays by academics, journalists and politicians on the history and contemporary structure of the Scottish media see Blain, N. and Hutchison, D., eds., The Media In Scotland, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2008.
[2] Herman, A., The Scottish Enlightenment, London, Fourth Estate, 2002.
[3] See his Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

eager to perform their fourth estate role, Scottish political journalists were emasculated by the fact that they had no parliament to report, just the Scottish Office, a department of the Westminster government.

Then came New Labour, and devolution. A Scottish parliament was established in 1999, and a new era for the Scottish media began. The parliament established by the 1998 Scotland Act was not a government with all of the powers accruing to nation states, but it was a major constitutional advance on the Scottish Office. Among its most enthusiastic supporters were Scottish journalists, in the belief that now at last they had a representative government of sufficient power and authority to really get their teeth into. If the journalist in a democracy is ideally cast as a watchdog, now they had something to watch over. Overnight, it seemed, Scottish politics had become bigger, more relevant, a story worthy of the best journalistic talents. Scottish politics would be galvanised, and so would the Scottish media. Democracy would be strengthened.

In response to devolution the Scottish media beefed up their editorial resource devoted to politics. A Scottish parliamentary lobby formed, and there was substantial investment in providing reporting facilities, by media organisations and politicians alike. An entirely new zone of the Scottish public sphere came into being, staffed by the best and the brightest of Scottish journalists, focused on this new constituent assembly on which the eyes of Scotland, the UK and the world were trained.

Ten years on, though, and all is not well. The Scottish media, both print and broadcast, are in a state of crisis. A large part of that crisis is caused by the global structural shift from print and analogue broadcasting – the great carrier media of the twentieth century – to the internet and digital TV[4]. Newspaper circulations in Scotland are in decline, as they are in every advanced capitalist country, as readers abandon print and move online to mobile platforms such as PCs, telephones and PDAs. In the UK as a whole that decline has been around three per cent year on year for a decade. But in Scotland it has been higher – six percent for many titles in 2008. This can be explained in part by the very richness and diversity of the Scottish media marketplace, where UK-based papers with well-resourced Scottish editions such as the Sun take market share from indigenous titles such as the Record. The Sunday Herald competes not only with Scotland On Sunday, but all the London-based Sundays too, several of which take their Scottish readers very seriously indeed.[5]

As for broadcasting, Scottish media organisations suffer from the same technological and cultural shifts as their UK parents and partners. BBC Scotland struggles to remake itself for the digital century, and will succeed, but STV faces major and as yet unresolved revenue problems in the wake of analogue switch-off. Throughout the sector there is gloom and pessimism, and despite the good work of the Scottish Broadcasting Commission in identifying issues and challenges the future of Scottish broadcasting remains as of this writing unclear.

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[4] For a discussion of the future of journalism in global terms see McNair, B., 'Journalism in the 21st century – evolution, not extinction', Journalism, volume 10, number 3, pp343-345, 2009.

[5] I discuss current issues facing the Scottish news media in News and Journalism In the UK, 5th edition, London, Routledge, 2009.

On the other hand, Scottish media have for the first time had a proper democratic parliament to report on, a parliament now infused with the drama of a nationalist government committed to independence, if not now, then when the fear induced by the credit crunch and the global recession has become a memory and we get back to politics as usual. One might expect the media in Scotland to benefit from this reconfigured political landscape, to have gained audiences rather than shed them as they have. But the parliament too has its problems. Principally, that of poor public participation and esteem. In the first Scottish parliamentary elections of 1999, just over 58 per cent of the people voted. In 2003 the figure was down to 49.4 per cent, and in 2007 up a little to 51.72 per cent. While these figures are not especially low by comparison with similarly endowed bodies elsewhere, the decline after 1999 is clear After the first flush of popular enthusiasm, it seems, the Scottish people lost their initial enthusiasm for their parliament and its MSPs.

Levels of democratic participation are affected by many factors, and causality is impossible to prove. But there is widespread consensus amongst political scientists, media scholars, journalists and politicians alike that the performance of the political media may have had something to do with the marked decline in voting rates seen in the UK and elsewhere in the western world in the last decade (notwithstanding that these have come up again in the most recent UK and US elections). Critics of the media have talked of the 'corrosive cynicism' of political journalists, the 'hyperadversarialism' of the Paxmanesque interviewers, the relentless focus on the negative which has characterised political news in recent times. And in Scotland there has certainly been plenty of that in coverage of the parliament since 1999.

**Reporting the parliament, 1999-2009**

The trouble started even before the parliament was constructed, with the controversy surrounding the appointment of Enric Miralles and the subsequent huge increases in the budget for the building. While the Miralles controversy was mainly aesthetic (and to some extent procedural), and quickly faded when people saw the beauty of the building, the cost issue dominated the news agenda in the first years of the parliament's life and, as with the Millenium Dome in London, cast a shadow over the 'project'. Scottish politicians only had themselves to blame for this, given Donald Dewar's reckless assertion before the work began that a new parliament could be had for less than £50 million. The final bill of more than £400 million represented a 900 per cent over-run on that early back-of-a-napkin estimate, and was widely and justifiably reported in the Scottish media as a product of mismanagement.[6]

Earlier in the parliament's life, while it still sat in its temporary home on the Mound, the first of a series of alleged corruption stories affecting MSPs emerged. In August 1999 the Observer made allegations that Beattie Media, a public relations and lobbying company employing amongst others the son of senior New Labour minister John Reid was using its familial and other Labour contacts to attract parliamentary lobbying business. The firm could deliver special access to key decision makers in the

[6] See for example Hamish McDonnell's Scotsman piece, 'Holyrood's world-class price overrun', August 28 2003.

parliament, it claimed (according to the Observer), and thus advantage in the competition for public sector contracts and spending.

The story became a Scottish and UK-wide media scandal, and while John Reid successfully deflected accusations of nepotism and worse it tarnished the parliament, virtually from the outset, with the image of shady dealings, old pals' networks, and Labour mafias at the heart of the devolution project. Scottish politics as usual, in other words, rather than the promised new dawn of accessible, accountable government.

Further, even juicier scandals followed. Donald Dewar's successor as first minister, Henry McLeish, was forced to resign in 2001 following allegations that he had improperly sublet his constituency office. Not to be outdone, the Conservative leader in the parliament, David McLetchie, quite after being caught spending £11,500 of tax payers money on taxi fares while on party business. More recently, Labour leader Wendy Alexander was forced to resign after admitting a breach of electoral funding regulations, this in the context of a concurrent UK-wide scandal about Labour's campaign which ended Gordon Brown's brief honeymoon period as prime minister.

The scandal of the parliament building returned in the form of a 2006 documentary about the project commissioned by the BBC, at a reported cost of £3 million, from the Wark Clements media company. Controversy surrounded the fact that Kirsty Wark, a close friend of Donald Dewar, as well as a senior BBC news journalist and thus with an obligation to impartiality in all things political, had been appointed by Dewar to the committee which appointed Enric Miralles as the project architect. She was also, it then emerged in the increasingly gleeful Scottish media, a close friend of Jack McConnell, by then first minister. Photographs of her and McConnell sharing holidays in Mallorca appeared in the Scottish papers, and Wark's position at the BBC was called into question (as well as the potential for conflict of interest around her involvement with The Gathering Place documentary). Again, Scottish media audiences were presented with the appearance of a clique of insiders extending from the parliament to other sectors of society, and using their connections for personal and political advantage.

Most scandalous of all, however, was the Tommy Sheridan saga, which included the full gamut of sex, lies and videotape, and as of this writing remains the subject of legal action. The details of the scandal affecting the leader of the Scottish Socialist Party, who also happened to be one of Scotland's most outspoken MSPs, are less important than the fact that for months, indeed years, it flooded the Scottish media with tales of sexual degeneracy, comradely backstabbing, macho left posturing and alleged perjury.

These examples do not exhaust the flow of scandal generated by the Scottish parliament in its first decade, but they may help to explain the less than wholehearted enthusiasm with which the Scottish electorate now treats the institution it so widely welcomed just a decade ago. Media coverage of the parliament has represented its members as financially and morally corrupt, and suggested that they form part of the same old cliques which, critics assert, have dominated Scottish politics for decades. These may be unfair and inaccurate perceptions of the quality of the majority of MSPs, but even the most forgiving of observers may be forgiven for thinking there is at least a grain of truth in them.

There is little point in criticising the Scottish media for this coverage, even if we conclude that it has been unfair at times, and damaging to the parliament's public standing. Many, if not all of the journalists who took on the parliamentary beat were relatively inexperienced, as would be expected, and thus ill-equipped to cover adequately the more complex and technical dimensions of the Holyrood story. Theere were no precedents, and only a few such as Iain MacWhirter who came to the task with substantial Westminster experience.

This deficit has declined over time, as journalists acquire knowledge and expertise of the system. But whether journalists are experienced in the ways of their parliament or not (and sleaze was just as big an issue in Westminster coverage as it has been at Holyrood) the unavoidable fact remains that news organisations in Scotland, as elsewhere, are competitive beasts, driven by news values which prioritise the dramatic, the negative, the conflictual. Corruption when exposed is bound to become the subject of scandal, which is why politicians in the modern world of always-on, hyper-active media are well advised to ensure that they are free of it, and secure against the accusation of it. The citizen, indeed, is entitled to expect his or her media to report these issues fully, if fairly, and one person's 'corrosive cynicsm', produced by what Tony Blair called the 'feral beast' of the political media, is another's firm but fair critical scrutiny.

**Missing the wood for the trees**

And with all this scandal to report, who can blame the Scottish media for under-reporting the good news about the parliament? The Labour-Liberal government which lost power to the SNP in 2007 with the narrowest of margins had presided over a period of respectable, if not world-beating economic growth. Scotland's perennial problems of welfare state dependency, alcohol-fuelled violence and social deprivation had not been cured, nor noticeably improved, but neither was the story of the first decade of devolved government one of disastrous incompetence. Given the evidence that the rise of the SNP between 2003 and 2007 was related to public perceptions of a lack of competence in government, and its failure to look after Scottish interests [cite research, James?] may have had at least something to do with the constant flow of scandal and corruption stories about the parliament flowing from the Scottish media from 1999 onwards, most of them involving the Labour party. As for the Major government in the UK a decade before, the perception of sleaze, alongside issues of competence, may have fuelled the perception that it was 'time for a change' at Holyrood.

The 2007 election created a new political environment in Scotland, and the issues driving the second decade of the parliament are very different from those of the first. The political media have changed too. Journalists have gained experience and maturity, as have the politicians they are tasked to cover. We might expect this process to produce a more constructive, productive pattern of parliamentary coverage, which will help voters to make the best possible choices. Serious politics is rarely as interesting as scandal, but since the election of an SNP government, one can say that there is at least now a fair competition. Parliamentary debates have never been as engaged. Scottish political journalists have never had so much drama to report from the floor of the parliament as they have done in the last year or two, and they have not

done badly in covering it. This must be good for the politcians, for the media and for the public. We await the 2011 electoral turn out with interest.

(2800 words, including biog and notes)

**Biog**

Brian McNair is Professor of Journalism and Communication at the university of Strathclyde. He is the author of several books and scholarly articles on the media and democracy, and is a regular contributor to the print, online and broadcast media in Scotland. His most recent book is News & Journalism In the UK (fifth edition, Routledge 2009).